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AUTHOR Jung, Donald J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the experimental findings of Shanto Iyengar with regard to media agenda-setting and a theory of priming, summarizing his work across time. Following an introduction, the next section briefly reviews five of Iyengar's experiments on agenda-setting and priming, giving an overview and conclusions for each. The final section, a discussion, is mainly addressed to comments made by other researchers regarding their interpretations of Iyengar's findings, and also includes a review of responses made by Iyengar. Thirty-eight references are attached. (SR)

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SHANTO IYENGAR'S AGENDA SETTING EXPERIMENTS AND TENTATIVE THEORY OF PRIMING

by

Donald J. Jung
Purdue University
Department of Communication
309D Heavilon Hall
W. Lafayette, IN 47907
(317) 494-3313

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I.
INTRODUCTION

Swanson (1988) in his commentary on Rogers and Dearing's (1988) summary review of agenda-setting research offers some thought provoking and insightful conclusions on the nature and usefulness of agenda-setting as a theoretical concept. While Rogers and Dearing conclude that meta-research is now needed to identify links between the various levels (e.g., public, media, and policy) of agenda-setting research rather than more individual level studies, Swanson questions the ability to do this because of what he sees as the limited theoretic nature of agenda-setting. Both Rogers and Dearing's suggestions, and Swanson's suggestions have validity. In this paper I will focus on the experimental findings of Shanto Iyengar with regard to media agenda-setting and a theory of priming. This seems both the type of meta-research suggested by Rogers and Dearing, but limited to summarizing the work of one individual across time; and the individual level research suggested by Swanson.

I will first provide a brief review of results of Iyengar's experiments on agenda-setting and priming in capsule form which will constitute the bulk of this paper. The remainder will be addressed to comments made by Rogers and Dearing, and Swanson, with respect to their interpretations of Iyengar's findings, as well as a review of responses made by Iyengar.

To begin, it will be useful to define some terms related to media agenda-setting. Shaw et al. (1975) defined *agenda* as a list of issues (cumulative news coverage of a series of related events

fit together in a broad category) and events (discrete happenings limited by space and time) that are viewed at a point in time as ranked in a hierarchy of importance. The central proposition of the media agenda-setting hypothesis, as identified by McLeod, Becker, and Byrne (1974: 137), is that an audience member exposed to a given medium agenda will adjust his or her perceptions of the importance of issues on that agenda. The direction will correspond to the amount of attention devoted to those issues in the medium.

An attempt to understand why individuals have different issues agendas was first addressed by McCombs and Weaver (1973) through their notion of a need for orientation. They hypothesized that any individual, when issue relevance is high and uncertainty is high, has a high need for orientation. This need for orientation leads to greater media exposure, which in turn leads to greater agenda-setting effects.

Finally, Iyengar and Kinder (1987: 63) identify what they mean by priming when they say that by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged. Priming in this case then refers to changes in standards that people use to make political evaluations. At the individual level, priming is bringing things to mind. It goes hand in hand with availability (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; see also Ogles & Hoffner, 1987). With these basic concepts defined, I would now like to provide a review of Shanto Iyengar's experiments on media agenda-setting and priming.

II.
IYENGAR'S STUDIES ON AGENDA-SETTING AND PRIMING

A. IYENGAR, S. (1979). TELEVISION NEWS AND ISSUE SALIENCE: A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE AGENDA-SETTING HYPOTHESIS.

1. OVERVIEW

Iyengar (1979; 395-6) begins by asserting that exposure to the media tends to crystallize and reinforce rather than alter existing attitudes and behaviors. Political cognitions, most notably perceptions of issue salience, appear to be the only exceptions to this "law of minimal consequences" (McCombs and Masel-Walters, 1976). That is to say, issues which receive greater attention in the media are more likely to be viewed by voters as important.

Iyengar believes a reexamination of the agenda-setting hypothesis is important for several reasons. First, most previous analyses relied on narrowly defined samples of the electorate raising questions over the validity of the findings. Second, the great majority of agenda-setting studies had been conducted during the course of presidential election campaigns during which news watchers are bombarded with hoopla and trivia. Finally, most previous agenda-setting studies were descriptive in orientation; documenting the congruence between media content and issue salience without attempting to identify variables which strengthened or weakened correspondence between media issue coverage and audience perceptions of issue salience (p. 398).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is longitudinal and includes data from the 1974 and 1976 election campaigns allowing for comparison of agenda-setting during congressional and presidential campaigns. The working hypothesis used by Iyengar predicts that agenda-setting effects are likely to be more prominent among: (1) social and economic groupings that are most dependent on television for political information; (2) groups that are less politicized; and (3) groups whose attitudes toward the media and television in particular are favorable.

3. CONCLUSION

Iyengar found that analyses of data failed to detect any significant variation in the agenda-setting relationship. Put differently, an individual's personal issue agenda and the issue agenda of the networks (media agenda) tend to reflect prevailing realities.

Contrary to the agenda-setting hypothesis, Iyengar found the salience of issues likely to be a simple function of the number of individuals affected regardless of what one sees or reads in the media. In short, agenda-setting by the media may be limited to the more peripheral and remote issues (unobtrusive) that are beyond the reach of personal experience (p. 410). Iyengar concludes that the agenda-setting hypothesis is limited to examining the effects of a single variable - media content, whereas, issue salience is dependent on various other influences including one's personal concerns and experiences which may be quite independent of media content (p. 411).

Summarizing, Iyengar states that if the dynamics by which the public's issue agenda is formed are to be understood, and if analyses of issue salience are to use both media content and individual characteristics as explanatory variables, it is essential additional longitudinal data be brought to bear on the subject. This is what he attempts to do in his next series of experiments.

B. IYENGAR, S., PETERS, M.P., AND KINDER, D.R. (1982). EXPERIMENTAL DEMONSTRATIONS OF THE "NOT-SO-MINIMAL" CONSEQUENCES OF TELEVISION NEWS PROGRAMS.

1. OVERVIEW

In this series of experiments Iyengar et al. (1982) systematically manipulated the attention that network news programs devoted to various national problems by unobtrusively inserting into news broadcasts stories provided by the Vanderbilt Television News Archives. Experimental participants were led to believe that they were simply watching the evening news.

Iyengar et al., believed that this experimental approach also permitted them to examine a different though equally consequential version of agenda-setting; by attending to some problems and ignoring others, media may also alter the standards by which people evaluate government. This construct is what they called "*priming.*" Priming then, among other things, implies that fluctuations in the importance of evaluational standards may well depend on fluctuations in the attention each receives in the press (p. 849).

Here they attempted to examine individual-level processes that might account for agenda-setting. The threefold purpose of these

experiments were to: (1) provide experimental evidence on the degree to which the priorities of the evening newscast affect the public's agenda; (2) examine whether network news priorities also affect the importance the public attaches to various standards in its presidential evaluations; and (3) explore individual cognitive processes that might underlie agenda-setting (p. 849).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Experiment 1 focused on alleged weaknesses in U.S. defense capability and employed two conditions. One group of participants (N=13) saw several stories about inadequacies in American defense preparedness, and a control group saw newscasts with no defense-related stories (N=15).

Experiment 2 examined three problems, requiring three conditions. In one group (N=15) participants viewed newscasts emphasizing (as in Experiment 1) inadequacies in U.S. defense preparedness. The second group (N=14) saw newscasts emphasizing pollution of the environment. The third group (N=15) saw newscasts with steady coverage of inflation. Each condition in Experiment 2 was characterized not only by a concentration of stories on the appropriate target problem, but also by deliberate omission of stories dealing with the two other problems under examination.

Experimental participants were shown inserted stories that were actual news stories which previously had been broadcast by ABC or NBC. These inserted stories were acquired from the Vanderbilt Televisions News Archives. All insertions and deletions were made in the middle portion of the newscast and spread evenly across experimental days (p. 850).

3. CONCLUSION

Data from Experiments 1 and 2 were interpreted as evidence for priming. Iyengar et al. found that the medias agenda does seem to alter the standards people use in evaluating the president. Although the patterns were not as regular as expected, they did find that priming appeared to account for the anticipated pattern (p. 853). Moreover, they argued that agenda-setting is strengthened by the degree to which audience members fail to counterargue. Agenda-setting appears to be mediated, not by the information viewers recall, but rather by the covert evaluations *triggered* by the news presentations. Those with little political information to begin with are most vulnerable to agenda-setting. The well informed appear to resist agenda-setting through effective counterarguing, a maneuver not so available to the less informed.

They believe that their experiments sustain Lippmann's (1922) suspicion that media provide compelling descriptions of a public world that people cannot directly experience. By selectively ignoring some problems and attending to others, television news programs affect which problems viewers take seriously. This phenomena is especially pronounced among the politically naive. They also isolated another pathway of media influence: priming. Problems prominently positioned in television broadcasts significantly affect evaluations of presidential performance.

They concluded that the regularity and frequency of news broadcasts mean that classical agenda-setting and priming are, for most people, continuous processes (p. 855).

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder concluded that agenda-setting may be a particular manifestation of a general inclination in human inference - an inclination to overvalue "salient" evidence. They cite experimental research that indicates under diverse settings, the judgments people make are swayed inordinately by evidence that is incidentally salient. That is to say, perceptually prominent information captures attention; greater attention, in turn, lead automatically to greater influence.

Therefore, agenda-setting may reflect a mix of processes: automatic imprinting among the politically naive; critical deliberation among the politically expert (p. 856). The criteria by which complex stimuli are judged can be profoundly altered by their prior (and seemingly incidental) *activation*. Accessibility and activation thus become central concerns, and these are what Iyengar addresses in his next series of experiments.

C. IYENGAR, S., PETERS, M.P., KINDER, D.R., AND KROSNICK, J.A. (1984). THE EVENING NEWS AND PRESIDENTIAL EVALUATIONS.

1. OVERVIEW

Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder in this series of experiments attempted an understanding of the accessibility effect by identifying those general considerations that mitigate or enhance it. They proceed from the assumptions that: (1) our evaluations of others are deeply influenced by circumstance; and (2) information that circumstance makes accessible often dominates our evaluations, whereas equally pertinent but less accessible

information is set aside. In particular, they examined the degree to which the accessibility effect depends on the relevance of the triggering stimulus configuration to the judgment at hand and the way in which manipulations of accessibility interact with prior knowledge, which they called *expertise* (p. 778). Their investigation takes place within the domain of political cognition.

Previously Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982) demonstrated that the public's beliefs about which national problems are important and which are not are greatly influenced by television news. Now they suggest that the criteria involved in presidential evaluations may be determined largely by the stories that television news programs choose to cover. Coverage of a particular problem provides new information that is accessible by its recency. Coverage also may provoke viewers to recollect what they already know about the problem. Consequently, both newly acquired and previously acquired information may be made more available and therefore perhaps particularly influential (p. 779). Additionally, they were interested in determining whether experts also are less vulnerable than novices to the influence of television news in their judgments of the president.

To observe the effects of accessibility, relevance, and expertise on presidential evaluations, they conducted two experiments. Subjects in each viewed television news programs in which the amount of attention given to various national problems was manipulated. Consistent with their accessibility hypothesis, they expected that the more attention a problem received the more viewers would inject information about that problem into their summary evaluation of the president. Consistent with their

relevance hypothesis, they expected the effect to be stronger on evaluations of the president's general performance, intermediate on judgments of the president's competence, and smaller still on judgments of the president's integrity. Finally, consistent with their argument regarding expertise, they expected the accessibility effect to be pronounced among novices and sharply diminished among experts.

2. CONCLUSIONS

Their results showed strong support for the accessibility hypothesis (p. 785). They believed at least two mechanisms may underlie such effects. First, it may be that watching a story such as one having to do with the nation's defense automatically evokes the knowledge that viewers have accumulated in the past on that subject. Alternatively though, viewers may be quite aware of shifts in their evaluational standards.

They conclude that accessible information will be more or less influential depending also on the viewer's expertise (p. 786). Experts are relatively immune to manipulations of accessibility by television news programs, perhaps because they already have worked out for themselves the national significance of the problem and how heavily the president figures into it. In contrast, novices, whose standards are not nearly so entrenched, are influenced much more by television news stories. Novices reflect both predisposition and circumstance. To gain further insight into these ideas, further refinement of the psychological constructs associated with expertise were necessary. These psychological constructs are what Iyengar chose to explore in his next series of experiments.

D. IYENGAR, S., AND KINDER, D., (1985). PSYCHOLOGICAL ACCOUNTS OF MEDIA AGENDA-SETTING.

1. OVERVIEW

Iyengar and Kinder (1985) here initially explore the psychology of agenda-setting by drawing upon the results of four separate experiments which test three possibilities in particular: counterarguing, source credibility, and affect.

They proceed from the assumption that individuals do not register information passively. Instead, the news is evaluated by an individual within an established framework of prior knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. This is what they refer to this as their *counterarguing hypothesis*. As justification for this hypothesis they cite findings which illustrate that individuals who actively quarrel with the message are more resistant to persuasion; those who fail to do so are persuaded the most (see Petty and Cacioppo, 1984; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981).

Another possibility which may affect accessibility is that television news may derive its influence from viewer's beliefs in network authority. This second alternative explanation for agenda-setting they call the *source credibility hypothesis*. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that without having to consider the merits and liabilities of particular stories, viewers who judge the networks to be objective and accurate should be especially persuaded, whereas those who regard the networks as partisan and biased should be persuaded least.

Both the counterargument hypothesis and assessments of source credibility hypothesis entail deliberation, but the impact of television news also may be attributed to emotion. The vivid pictures and dramatic stories that are the networks' standard fare may evoke strong emotions in viewers. This is what they refer to as their *affect hypothesis*. This affect may itself directly boost the importance viewers assign to national problems (Zajonc, 1984), or, alternatively, affect may influence political judgment indirectly by focusing attention on the triggering stimulus (Clarke, 1954; McArthur, 1981; Taylor and Fiske, 1978).

It should be noted here that Iyengar and Kinder do not view counterargument, source credibility, and affect as mutually exclusive mediators of political judgment.

2. CONCLUSION

Iyengar and Kinder sought to test among several psychological explanations for agenda-setting. From their four experiments they drew the following conclusions: (1) by paying attention to some problems at the expense of others, television news alters the public's sense of national priorities (Experiments 1 and 2); (2) television coverage of a particular problem tends to be more powerful among viewers personally affected by the problem (Experiment 3); and, (3) stories tend to be especially influential when they begin the broadcast (Experiment 4).

Their strongest evidence was in support for the source credibility hypothesis which implies that television news is powerful because viewers regard the news as authoritative (p. 134). With a single exception -- the lead story effect -- all tests

confirmed the mediating role of credibility. Viewers who regarded the networks as impartial and accurate sources of information were more influenced by the news than those with less faith in ABC, NBC, or CBS. Viewers who grant considerable credibility to the networks are open to agenda-setting because they notice what the networks are saying (p. 135). This interpretation, emphasizing selective attention, suggests that agenda-setting effects may be one manifestation of general tendency in judgment: salient evidence is accorded importance far in excess of its inferential value which is logically consequential, but perceptually innocuous evidence is discounted (Taylor and Fiske, 1978; McArthur, 1981).

Iyengar and Kinder believe that: (1) the emphasis on selective attention is consistent with their findings on agenda-setting; (2) that credibility is an important mediator of agenda-setting; and (3) affect is of importance because one version of the affect hypothesis treats the significant consequence of emotional arousal to the directing of attention. They also found that lead stories are particularly influential in shaping viewers' priorities, suggesting that lead stories may owe their advantage to their special ability to command attention.

Iyengar and Kinder considered their results and interpretations tentative. Their primary objective was to establish the basic agenda-setting phenomenon and explore conditions that might enhance or undermine it. Encouraged by these finding, Iyengar and Kinder next prepared more extensive experiments, and put forth a tentative theory of priming. We now turn our focus to this set of experiments.

E. IYENGAR, S., AND KINDER, D.R. (1986). MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: TV NEWS, PRIMING, AND PUBLIC EVALUATIONS OF THE PRESIDENT.

1. OVERVIEW

Here Iyengar and Kinder set out to explore how television's infatuation with the President might influence public opinion. They concentrated particularly on the cognitive possibility of priming. Priming posits that by calling attention to some aspects of national life while ignoring others, network news programs determine the standards by which presidents are judged.

Summarizing their previous findings: (1) people do not pay attention to everything, attention is highly selective; and (2) under ordinary circumstances people seem to follow heuristics -- intuitive shortcuts or judgmental rules of thumb -- rather than exhaustive analysis. Iyengar and Kinder chose to focus on one such heuristic, reliance upon information that is most easily *accessible*. That is, we are much more likely to consider but a sample of what we know, and a sample of convenience at that; one which depends on its momentary accessibility (pp. 137-8; see also Ogles and Hoffner; 1987.

Iyengar and Kinder believe that this circumstantial basis for judgments of Presidential performance no doubt has many sources, but among the most important is television news. They hypothesize that the standards involved in judging a President may be substantially determined by which stories newscasts choose to cover and, consequently, which considerations are made. The more coverage television news devotes to a particular problem, the more frequently a problem domain is primed, and thus, the more viewers

should incorporate what they know about that problem into their overall judgment of the President (p. 139).

To test priming, they undertook two series of experiments. The first series, which were *sequential*, exposed participants to a sequence of unobtrusively altered network newscasts over the course of one week where participants saw one 30-minute newscast every day. Their second design, *assemblage*, exposed participants to a treatment story (usually one each day) which was inserted during the middle portion of the newscast and usually ran between 2 and 4 minutes.

If the priming hypothesis was correct, Iyengar and Kinder believed they should find that viewers who were shown stories about a particular problem attached greater significance to the President's performance *on that problem* when evaluating the President overall. They estimate priming by comparing the impact of ratings of the President's performance on a particular problem on evaluations of the President's general performance when television news covers the problem and when it does not. The difference between the two is the effect they believe due to priming (p. 144).

2. TESTING AN ALTERNATIVE TO PRIMING

Iyengar and Kinder found that their results also were consistent with an alternative view: that television coverage of a particular problem causes viewers to adjust their ratings of the President's performance on that problem so as to become consistent with their overall evaluation of the President. They called this possibility, which is the opposite of priming, *projection* (p. 149).

They believed that not only is projection a plausible alternative interpretation, it is one with real consequences. If priming holds, then television news possesses the capacity to alter the standards by which a President is judged, the degree of public popularity a President enjoys and therefore, in part, the power a President can wield. If projection holds, then they would have discovered that people interpret new events and/or reinterpret old events in ways that maintain consistency with their existing predispositions.

Their results sustained the priming hypothesis, showing that whereas the estimated impact of ratings of President Reagan's performance on arms control or evaluations of his general performance was very substantial among those primed with television coverage of arms control, it was negligible among those who saw no stories about arms control (p. 150).

III.
DISCUSSION

As Rogers and Dearing point out, agenda-setting is continuously under way in every organization as organizational problems which may create a perceived need for an innovation are identified and defined. Rogers (1983; 363) concludes, that the environment is searched for potential solutions (including innovations) that may help solve the high-priority problems.

Rogers and Dearing (1988) see more empirical attention paid to agenda-setting research than the development of theory, concluding that agenda-setting research is in greater need of a thorough meta-research analysis more than in need of further empirical study (p. 582).

Swanson's criticism of agenda-setting goes in a different direction, claiming "the one consistent attribute of this literature is the inconsistency of conceptualization, method, and result (1988; 604)." He sees the psychological construct, need for orientation, proposed by McCombs and Weaver in 1973 as the only explanatory idea media agenda-setting effects have on individuals. This has generated a more or less systematic program of research on individual agenda-setting.

Swanson also concludes that Iyengar and Kinder's 1985 results suggest that agenda-setting is mediated more by emotional reactions to stories than by cognitive responses (p. 609). This is not a completely accurate interpretation of their results, which will be addressed below.

Swanson sees need for orientation as being of little consequence in understanding the process by which media agendas are set. For Swanson the most useful accounts of how media priorities are determined point to: (1) the influence of especially prestigious news outlets and organizations; (2) the emergent culture and routine interactions governing reporters' relationships with official news sources; and (3) the interpretive frames used to transform events into news "stories" (p. 614).

Expanding on this, Swanson asserts that there has been no theoretical account of agenda-setting at the level of public policy. For him the theoretical conceptions used to explain personal and media agenda-setting offer little help in understanding the formation of policy agendas. He sees it likely that distinct processes not found at the personal or media level are at work on the policy level. Concluding, there does not appear to be a single, underlying process of agenda-setting on which a general integrative framework might be based (p. 615).

Iyengar (1988), in his response to Rogers and Dearing, sees that an important consequence of agenda-setting concerns the relative weight accorded issue beliefs and opinions when individuals evaluate political leaders or choose between candidates. Further, when issues move up the public agenda considerations bearing on these issues exert a stronger impact on evaluations of the incumbent president and on voting preferences. Summarizing, agenda-setting spills over to political attitudes and voting by altering the criteria underlying attitudes and voting choice (p. 596). Iyengar cites his agreement with some of the limitations of agenda-setting research pointed out by Rogers and

Dearing. The first is that agenda-setting research suffers from serious methodological limitations, most of which concern the validity of the inference that media agendas determine audience agendas.

A second methodological problem facing agenda-setting research concerns disentangling the effects of news coverage from the effects of direct experience. Rogers and Dearing note that media are but one of several potential determinants of the public's agenda. Personal experience is, in short, an important source of political agendas. Moreover, personal experience may make individuals more or less receptive to the media agenda. Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980) showed that agenda-setting was in fact an interactive effect, jointly produced by news coverage and audience sensitivities. Individuals with direct experience of some issue are the first to respond to news coverage, with others responding more sluggishly.

Finally, and related to the subject of personal experience, Iyengar believes that estimates of media agenda-setting must control for indicators of real-world developments. He believes that unless indicators of "reality" are incorporated, agenda-setting effects are bound to be confounded with the effects of direct experience (p. 597).

Building on Rogers and Dearing, Iyengar attempts to present a tentative theory of public agenda-setting based on his previous experimental findings which focused on three potential mediating mechanisms: (1) counterargument/yielding; (2) assessments of source credibility; and (3) the arousal of affect (p. 598).

Although agenda-setting has been generally presented as a passive construct, Iyengar points out that individuals do not register incoming information passively. Instead, they interpret, elaborate upon, and evaluate information within an existing network of knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. Iyengar sees counterargument as active, requiring effort and motivation. However, rather than carefully deliberating over the content of news stories, the typical viewer may instead resort to various shortcuts for deciding whether issues covered in the news are indeed important (p. 598). One such shortcut is credibility. In addition to counterargument and assessments of source credibility, Iyengar sees the impact of media presentations also mediated by the degree to which these presentations provoke emotional response (p. 598).

Citing a series of experiments (Iyengar & Kinder, 1985), designed to assess the agenda-setting impact of television news programs by tracking the relative contributions of counterargument, source credibility, and affect on viewers' judgments of issue importance, Iyengar summarizes their findings:

1. Source credibility was the most consistent mediator.
2. Viewers more prone to emotional responses tended to be more susceptible to agenda-setting, but this effect was not robust.
3. Only limited evidence in favor of the counterargument hypothesis.

As a result of these findings Iyengar and Kinder conclude that agenda-setting is mediated by both viewers' assessments of source credibility and their emotional responses to news coverage (599). This is a quite different conclusion than Swanson claims they make regarding the strongest mediator being affect.

Iyengar also summarizes what he considers to be the three main limitations of the agenda-setting effect (p. 600):

1. It is limited to some national issues.

2. With regard to the specificity of the agenda-setting effect, news coverage of some issues raises the importance audience members accord that issue and that issue alone.

3. Individuals have resources of their own with which to counteract media influence which again focuses attention back to interpersonal channels.

Iyengar thus appears to agree with Swanson that agenda-setting research is most useful when studied at local levels where individual differences can be measured. However, he also agrees with both Rogers and Dearing and Swanson that agenda-setting is a limited concept, not theory, and mediated by external interpersonal contacts.

By presenting in an organized fashion the research findings of Iyengar, this paper has tried to help focus on exactly what has been found through one series of programatic experiments on agenda setting. I make no conclusions other than to point out that Shanto Iyengar has endeavored to build upon his own work and the work of others regarding the nature of agenda-setting. No theory may yet have been put forward regarding agenda-setting, and none may ever come, but the systematic work done by Iyengar on agenda-setting will most certainly be viewed as central to such theory if ever advanced.

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